

SONG OF SOLOMON 8.6-7: TRUE LOVE

A sermon on the occasion of the marriage of Rachel Horn and Matt Rowe

The Song of Solomon is an incredibly erotic book. To a large extent ‘Bowdlerised’ in our English versions, the language is pretty strong. And yet Matt and Rachel have asked me to preach from it.

To be precise, they have asked me to preach on two verses from the final chapter: viz. Song of Solomon 8.6-7. In that respect Matt and Rachel have taste. One commentator writes that these verses are “the most memorable and intense of the whole book” (Tremper Longman III).

But Matt and Rachel have wrenched the two verses from their context. For they have taken away the opening two lines in v5: “**Under the apple tree I woke you, in the place where you were born**”. So runs the GNB version. It all sounds pretty tame stuff – until you turn to the commentaries. And there you will discover that it is all about sex.

In the cultures of the Near East the apple tree was a great symbol of fertility. It was there, under the apple tree, that the girl aroused her lover. It was there that they stripped off and made passionate love to one another. In so doing they were but following the example of the man’s parents – for it was under the same oak tree that the his mother had conceived.

If you want to read about sex, don’t bother with ‘50 Shades of Grey’. It’s all here in the Bible. It may come as a surprise to some that the Bible never advocates Platonic love. Why even the Apostle Paul urged his converts not to engage in sexual abstinence – once they were married that is.

Young people – and indeed not so young people – will love one another. They will love one another passionately. That’s a fact of life. God has made us to mate.

But God doesn’t want us to love one another indiscriminately. When it comes to passionate sex, God wants us to love one another only within the context of a committed relationship.

This is the context in which the girl says to her lover: “**Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm**”. A seal is a sign of commitment, it is a sign of belonging. In the Ancient Near East there were two types of clay seals – the stamp and the cylinder. Both were symbols of possession.

The girl is saying here “possess me” – not just in a one night stand, but possess me for ever. Take me – own me - make me yours. Gosh, it must have been a leap year!

For all the love-making under the apple tree, the girl is a little old-fashioned, when it comes to the seal or sign of belonging. And of course, that is the way in which marriage used to be in this country. There were never two rings, but only one. The man owned the woman. She belonged

to him. Thank God, we have moved on – we now have two rings. A couple belong to one another.

“Place me like a seal over your heart”. The heart in those days was deemed to be the place where you not only loved, but you also thought.
Make me, says the girl, the centre of your inner world.

“Place me like a seal on your arm”. The girl is not talking about walking out together, arm in arm. No the arm is a symbol of the man’s actions.
Not just in your thoughts, but also in your actions make me the centre of your world.

The girl doesn’t want just to live with the guy.
She doesn’t just want sex – indeed she doesn’t just want companionship.
She wants commitment, she wants security, she wants marriage.

It has been said: *‘Love is the whole history of a woman’s life; it is only an episode in man’s’* (Anna Louise de Stael): i.e. a man may often compartmentalize his life so that he devotes his full attention to each of his interests in turn – whereas a woman can multi-task; her love relationship suffuses every part of her existence, job, career whatever.
Does this kind of thinking lie behind the girl’s intense pleading to the man to own her, well and truly? I don’t know.

But one thing for sure. Within the context of this passionate, intense, jealous form of loving, three statements are made about love:

1. Love is stronger than death
2. Love burns more strongly than fire
3. Love is worth more than anything money can buy

Love is stronger than death. Actually the Scripture states: **“love is as strong as death, its jealousy as enduring as the grave”.** The point is this: we all have to die.
Death and income tax are the two certainties of life.
But just as nothing can stop death, so nothing can come in the way of true love.
True love is irresistible, unshakeable, totally resolute.

Love burns more strongly than fire. **“Love flashes like fire, the brightest kind of flame. Many waters cannot quench love, nor can rivers drown it”.**
The flame represents the intensity of passionate love.
Scholars tell me that there may well be a reference to the divine name: true love is ‘God-awful’ – it burns with such fearful heat, that nothing can put it out.
The river the poet speaks of may represent the disappointments and difficulties of life – where is true love, where there is passionate commitment, there is nothing in this life which can undo the bond.

Love is worth more than anything money can buy. **“If a man tried to buy love with all his wealth, his offer would be completely scorned”.**

You can buy sex any night of the week, but you cannot buy love.
Money can buy many things – but it cannot buy the heart.

Love – the love that really counts – is stronger than death, burns more strongly than fire, and is worth more than anything money can buy.
Why then do so many marriages fail? Why then do so many marriages end in the divorce courts?
Because the only context for love that lasts is commitment.

Commitment is the name of the game. The reality is that at this very moment Matt and Rachel do not love one another more than they loved one another at breakfast.
But in getting married, Matt and Rachel have pledged not just their love, but their lives to one another. “All that I am and all that I have is yours”.
Where there is commitment, there love will flourish.
But without commitment, love hasn't a hope.

Matt and Rachel – I have no doubt about your commitment – your commitment not just to God, but also to one another. May the God you serve truly bless your commitment to one another.
May you discover that love is indeed stronger than death, is more passionate in its ardour than any fire, and makes anything love may buy seem insignificant.